The Fourth Church Pulpit

IMAGINE THAT!

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Proverbs 1:20-23, 32-33 Mark 8:22-26

"Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again,...and he saw everything clearly."
Mark 8:25 (NRSV)

In the movie everyone is talking about, a man with significant intellectual limitations sits on a bench waiting for a bus and tells a story to a series of people who for a while sit with him waiting, and listening. His name is Forrest Gump, and he tells the story of his life. It's quite a tale. The way he tells it he has been present and involved in every major event in our nation for thirty years. He meets every president from Kennedy on, is an All-American football player, teaches Elvis to dance and suggests song titles to John Lennon, wins the Congressional Medal of Honor, witnesses and reports the Watergate break-in, and becomes a millionaire. Is it true? Did all that actually happen to Forrest Gump or did it occur in his imagination? Is it either/or – or – both/and? It may be an important movie; a lot of people like it and talk about it. It may be important precisely because of the way it uses and invites the use of adult imagination. Did that all happen? Of course not. And yet, imagination leads viewers to remember our history, to ponder both its pathos and glory, and to reflect on the mysteries of human love and kindness and loyalty and faithfulness. Of course it is not factually true. But, of course it is nevertheless a story that bears witness to a lot of truth – truth clarified, truth seen better, by imagination.

Imagination. An usher told me about a couple who had apparently not been here for several months, and apparently had not been reading their church mail, who walked in a Sunday or so ago, were greeted as always, and then strode briskly down the center aisle to their pew – or where the pew in which they always sat used to be – and suddenly the reality of scaffolding, folding chairs, floor covering suddenly came into focus. They stopped in their tracks and she asked him, the usher, in a loud voice – "What in the world is going on here?"

It takes imagination to get past the immediate visual impact, does it not? And if you want a real challenge to your imagination, you should see this sanctuary on a Wednesday or Thursday when the air is literally so full of dust that you can't see, and so full of the sound of the mortar grinding machine that you cannot hear, and water from the stone cleaning is cascading down over the walls onto the floor. Without imagination it would be a very disconcerting and depressing experience – and inaccurate. That's the point actually. Imagination is not merely an ability to experience whimsy and fancy, it is part of seeing accurately. Without imagination, in fact, we are quite blind.

That is the point, I think, of a familiar story Luke tells about Jesus. I smile every time I hear this story because of a memory it automatically evokes. It has to do with the business about Jesus putting saliva on the blind man's eyes – or spittle – as the older versions graphically and indelicately put it. That never sounded like a nice thing to have happen to one. I smile when I read Luke 8 because I remember something like it happening to me – regularly – and not liking it one bit. Some people are cursed with and troubled by a peculiar phenomenon known as a "cowlick," a kind of fiendish swirl at the crown of the head which makes hair want to stand up in a disorderly fashion, and which wreaks considerable havoc on the slicked down, Vitalis enhanced style of my childhood. I could actually feel my cowlick spring into action. My mother would observe it, narrow her eyes and then – I knew it was coming – gently and discreetly wet her handkerchief or fingers, at her mouth, and administer it to my cowlick. I still see this little drama happening and the little victims seem to dislike it as much as I did.

A blind man was brought to Jesus. The context: Jesus has just scolded his friends. They have misunderstood the meaning of something he did. "Do you not understand? Have you eyes and fail to see?" he has just asked them.

Then the blind man is presented. In what is a quietly tender gesture, Jesus takes him by the hand and leads him away – away from the village, away I presume, from the curious, away from embarrassment and awkwardness. That's when he applies saliva to the man's eyes. The treatment is only partially successful. The man saw people, sort of; actually he can't tell whether he's seeing people or trees. It's pretty fuzzy. So Jesus touches him a second time, intensely, and this time the man sees clearly, accurately.

Seeing, apparently, has two dimensions. Visual impact and then the meaning, the significance or truth of what is seen. The difference between the two is imagination.

What follows in the text illustrates. After healing the blind man, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" "You're the Messiah" Peter answers. "That's right." But Peter then demonstrates that he doesn't get it. He can't see – can't imagine a Messiah who will suffer and die. Theologically he can't imagine a God whose love is expressed like that.

Imagination got the Presbyterian Church in a lot of trouble earlier this year. In fact, "Imagination" in some church circles is the ecclesiastical equivalent of a four-letter word. Our church participated in and helped to fund a conference called "re-imagining God ... The Community, The Church ..." 2,000 attended, mostly women, 400 Presbyterian, and Re-Imagine they did! In the process of re-imagining God the conference worship leaders drew on an aspect of God described by a feminine noun – "sophia in" Greek: the wisdom of God – which is introduced in the first chapter of Proverbs. Many of the women who were there, not all but many, after a lifetime of praying to God in solely masculine images such as Father, King, found it liberating and helpful and theologically accurate to use a feminine image for God – "sophia," wisdom. To some, on the other hand, it seemed that the image had become the reality and what we had was a new deity, a goddess whose name was Sophia. There was more to it, of course. The conference re-imagined the church and community in terms that were breathtakingly inclusive – magnificently inclusive some thought, with no barriers, no distinctions on the basis of age or gender or sexual orientation. Some thought the re-imagined church looked like it didn't stand for or believe anything in particular.

The conflict was serious – is serious. Good Presbyterian folk got truly angry: people who believed their personal faith was being ridiculed by the content of a conference their money had helped fund: and people who loved what transpired and profoundly believe that the conference expressed the mission of the church at its best and were hurt and angry that other Presbyterians didn't trust their ability to discern what is appropriate and true.

The conflict absorbed a good part of the spring and summer for some of us and will continue to do so. As you may know, I was asked to help our church deal with this conflict. The resolution, nearly unanimously approved by the General Assembly of our church, said two important things. One – there is a Christian theology: a Christian way of thinking and seeing that endures and that we Presbyterians care about and intend to celebrate, preserve and pass on to another generation. It is the faith once delivered and defined and described in the historic creeds. But two – the imaginative task is critical. The church, in every age, is called by its Lord to Re-Imagine itself – the world – and God: that is, to find ever new and relevant ways to talk about God in and to a world that is not always eager to listen, let alone believe.

By coincidence, I flew home from the meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in Wichita and the next day joined a group of Fourth Presbyterian Church members on a trip to Rome. Literally hours after the Assembly adjourned with our modest Presbyterian communion, I found myself standing in the Basilica of St. Peter's, the largest church in the world, an incredible experience. And I found myself both deeply impressed with the power and glory and strength and the art that building represents, but also deeply grateful that my heritage, my theological and ecclesiastical tradition began when Martin Luther, and a few years later, John Calvin, re-imagined Church – Community – God. And while I loved St. Peter's and am grateful because it represents the Christian tradition for 1,500 years before the Reformation, and therefore it is our heritage too, I found myself grateful for a Reformed Tradition, 80 million strong which continues to re-imagine itself, reform itself, and its view of the world and life and future.

> "Imagination," Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "is the church's central task." She explains. "By that I do not mean a fanciful or fictional task, but one in which the human capacity to imagine – to form mental pictures of the self, the neighbor, the world, the future, to envision new realities – is both engaged and transformed." [*The Preaching Life*, p. 39]

Reformed theologian Eugene Petersen agrees. [*Under the Predictable Plant*, p. 169]

> "We who are made in the image of God have, as a consequence, imag - ination."

Imagination is the ability to "form a mental image of something not present to the senses," the dictionary says. If we can't do that, our reality is limited to that we can see, hear, touch, smell, taste. Nothing more. Nothing of eternity and passion and dreams and hopes and faith and love.

We're born with a wonderful capacity for imagination. Children are brilliant imaginers. I recall watching children playing for days with a playmate I could not see but who was clearly a reality to the children. I recall watching, misty-eyed, as a little boy played out an entire football game all by himself: passing, running, tackling, including standing at attention with his helmet tucked under his arm, singing – full voice – the "National Anthem."

Some of it recedes as intellect, reason, common sense develops. We have two tools with which to deal with reality: intellect and imagination and we need both. What happens to many of us is that we lose our capacity to imagine altogether. We allow ourselves to become convinced that reality is confined to our ability to reason and measure and compute.

Eugene Petersen suggests that we have a crisis of imagination on our hands in our culture. He writes,

> "The American imagination today is distressingly sluggish. Most of what is served up to us as the fruits of imagination is, in fact, the debasing of it into soap opera and pornography." [p. 171]

And he wrote that before the O. J. Simpson affair and Oliver Stone's, "Natural Born Killers."

Imagination is or can be powerful. Physicians use "guided imaging." At least part of healing is imagining yourself well. Coaches teach it. Absolutely essential to success, to winning, is the ability to imagine yourself successful and winning. Teachers use imagination to teach. In one experiment children were encouraged to see mental images of big, colorful numbers, instead of struggling with the intellectual abstraction that a raw number is, and they did better adding, subtracting, multiplying. [Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 45]

> "Over and over again," Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "the human imagination turns out to be the place where vision is formed and reformed, where human beings encounter an inner reality with power to transfer the other reality of our lives." [p. 46]

I don't know about you, but I'm not sure I like what I see these days. I'm not sure I like what I see of a world apparently helpless and incapable of dealing with mass starvation, genocide and cruelty, a Rwanda, a Haiti. I'm not sure I like what I see of the Christian churches, incapable or unwilling to talk with one another about matters over which they have historically disagreed, matters that are now of life and death importance to the future of the world. I don't like what I see of a coalition which includes conservative evangelical Protestants, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and terrorist Muslim governments preventing imaginative and creative dialogue about the realities of population growth, resources and development. Thankfully, we have moved a few steps away from that in the past forty-eight hours.

I don't like at all what I see of my city, so beautiful, where I am privileged to live and work, and so utterly, unspeakably ugly, hellishly ugly for little children and their parents, who live elsewhere and are victims of the system which has made me so comfortable. I don't like what I see of a culture so drunk on violence, so addicted to the narcotic of entitlement and individual rights that it cannot even discuss the elimination of automatic weapons, hand guns.

It is, of course, so easy to say these things, to despair and lament, and so very difficult to know what to do. And so what many do, I fear, is withdraw, shut it all out, and live fully in this moment, in this lovely segment of a suffering world and a city which in other neighborhoods seem to be in the violent throes of death. And I propose that Jesus won't let us do that. That his hands are on our eyes, forcing us to see clearly. And that our responsibility is to imagine – to see a world, an alternative world, that does not yet exist. I propose that we have a "ministry of imagination." That although solutions are every bit as complex as the problems themselves, our Christian task is to imagine them: in this part of the culture which has the wherewithal – financially and intellectually – to contribute to the resolution but which wants to shut it all out, we are, I believe, called by our Lord to be the place, the people, who do the imagining – of a world – a church – a city – as God wants it to be, and so a world and church and city which call for our best efforts and work and sacrifice to bring it to reality.

Imagination personally brings us into the presence of the mystery of God. Kathleen Norris, poet, author of the bestseller, *Dakota,* tells about her long spiritual journey back to faith and church. It happened, in part, by her recovery of her memory of family. She tells a story about it that speaks to the personal importance of imagination.

Her grandmother Norris was a pastor's wife, a determined and zealous fundamentalist who all her life asked of anyone she met, "Are you saved?" The mother of seven, her marriage lost all its passion; her sons fared well, her daughters, not so well. Kathleen Norris was affected by the story of one aunt in particular who "died of lots of things; sex and fundamentalist religion and schizophrenia and post-partem despair."

> "She was a good girl who became pregnant out of wedlock and could make no room for the bad girl in herself. She jumped out a window at the state mental hospital a few days after she had the baby."
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> Norris comments: "This goes much deeper than anything I understand, but, in part, I also joined a church because of her. I needed to find that woman sacrificed to a savage God." [p. 101]

That young woman, Kathleen Norris's aunt, knew only a God of judgment, a stern God who condemns young women like her. She could not imagine a God of compassion and forgiveness, a God of mercy who might even love with a special love a young, frightened woman about to have a baby alone.

Jesus imagined a God like that, a divine love like that. Can you?

As you work on freeing your imagination: as you commit yourself to seeing clearly – as God sees – and imagining a world, a city, as God wants it to be, please do imagine yourself – as the object of God's love, God's child, beloved, wanted, accepted, welcomed. Please do imagine Jesus leading you by the hand: restoring your sight.

Imagine that!